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THEORY & PRACTICE

Companies Find Online Training Has Its Limits

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Home Depot Inc. likes computer-based training -- most of the time. When the big Atlanta-based retailer hires new cashiers, it marches them through online simulations of making change and processing credit cards. Recruits learn so quickly that training time has shrunk 30% from classroom norms.

On the sales floor, however, it's a different story. After dabbling with online training, **Home Depot** is relying more on personal mentoring instead. It has started a U.S.-wide hiring drive for experienced plumbers, landscapers and other tradespeople, asking them to help coach rookie sales associates.

"There's no substitute for having skilled tradespeople in the aisles, informally spreading knowledge," says Roger Anderson, Home Depot's director of learning for store associates. Selling requires knowing the products, explaining them clearly and discerning customer wants, he explains. Computer drills can't easily blend those elements; newcomers learn better by watching customer interactions.

Home Depot's two-pronged approach is being echoed at many companies. Online training is making rapid headway in areas where front-line workers need a standard set of facts. But to teach multiple skills for a complex job, companies opt for a more hands-on approach.

One supporter of face-to-face instruction is Winfred Arthur Jr., a professor of psychology and management at Texas A&M University. In a 2003 journal article, he reviewed 164 studies of various training methods' effectiveness. Trainees didn't always enjoy face-to-face teaching, but it produced some of the biggest knowledge jumps, he says.

Traci Sitzmann, a research scientist working for the U.S. Defense Department's Advanced Distributed Learning Co-Laboratory, reviewed 96 training studies conducted since 1996, and found Web-based training was more effective than classroom instruction for teaching facts. But she didn't find significant differences between the two for teaching overall job mastery.

Training Tips

Traci Sitzmann, a research scientist at the Defense Department's Advanced Distributed Learning program, says the following factors can help make Web-based training more effective:

- Letting trainees control how quickly or slowly they move through the curriculum.
- Making Web-based training part of a long course, rather than a momentary interruption in regular routines
- Letting trainees practice the material repeatedly if necessary
- Providing feedback to trainees during the instruction, rather than waiting until after it is completed.

Source: Personnel Psychology

"Selling is such an interpersonal interaction," says Steve Kittel, a training specialist for Recreational Equipment Inc. The Kent, Wash., retailer of outdoor goods spends hours helping new sales clerks spot the difference between transactional customers, who want a specific product, and consultative customers, who want to chat about choices.

REI uses videos for part of its sales training but has trimmed their role in recent years. It relies more on role-playing, with new employees facing trainers who simulate a wide range of customer behavior.

Tim Boyle, chief executive of Columbia Sportswear Co., says online training works best on subjects such as business ethics, "where you want to make sure that every employee hears the same message." The Portland, Ore., clothing and footwear company has created e-learning material to teach retailers' salespeople about its products. Sales rose 2% at stores that used it, Mr. Boyle says, "but we won't abandon other initiatives to focus more heavily on this."

For technical training, hands-on experience still predominates. "You can't learn to climb a telephone pole online," managers at **Qwest Communications International** Inc. say. The Denver phone company estimates that 80% of training in its network department is done face-to-face, versus 20% online.

Qwest trains many field technicians at a 252,000-square-foot facility in Lakewood, Colo., with 46 classrooms and six huts where employees practice wiring a home for telephone or Internet service. Instructors can introduce line trouble that trainees must diagnose and decide how to fix. To learn how to install and fix equipment, employees must "experience situations in the field," says Curt Reimer, Qwest's head of network training.

Home Depot officials say they can see the day the company uses e-learning for 50% of training, up from 30% now. But in areas such as customer service, sales and leadership, Mr. Anderson generally favors the face-to-face. "An important part of training involves having associates play back for you what they've learned," he explains. "You want them to demonstrate that they've acquired the right skills."